

DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICS

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September 6, 1966

Professor Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
Stanford University School of Medicine
Palo Alto, California

Dear Professor Lederberg:

I have been reading your column "Science and Man" in the "Outlook" section of the Washington Post with keen interest and appreciation. Congratulations on a first-class job. But let me take issue with your recent columns on the Icarus story, and the problem of irresponsible science journalism to which it relates.

To determine what happened, you corresponded with the scientist involved, printed his self-exonerating statement, and accorded it unquestioning belief. What disturbs me is not the uncritical acceptance by a distinguished scientist of an ex-parte account of an unrecorded exchange on the telephone, but the likelihood that the overwhelming majority of scientists will endorse your procedures and your judgment while a corresponding majority of journalists will react quite differently.


What is involved, basically, it seems to me, is a pattern of mutual distrust between scientists and journalists. Whatever the justifications for this distrust, it is essential to keep in mind that it is at bottom deeply ironic. Because if there are any groups in our society which are joined by a common bond of professional commitment to truth qua truth, it is precisely the scientists and the journalists. While the former bear witness to truth which is hopefully demonstrable by repetition, the latter have the seemingly tougher job of bearing witness to the truths of everyday human experience, encompassing the whole range of human concerns. Nevertheless, overriding this fundamental identity of interest there is a cleavage attributable above all, in my opinion, to problems of communication and education involving both parties. And I think it is not enough for the scientist to excoriate the shortcomings on the other side. Would we not be making a more effective contribution to effective solutions by asking what may be wrong on our side?

Is the scientist, unaccustomed to public notice but surely flattered by it, and, as often as not, caught by surprise

on the telephone, as prepared as he should be to deal with the problems of accurate communication with a journalist? Will he think of asking for a chance to see a story in which he is quoted before it appears? Has he ever considered the problem as a student preparing for a career in science, or as a teacher or as a researcher? The answer is almost certainly "no" in the case of the overwhelming majority of scientists facing this and innumerable other problems (see enclosed preprint) which confront the practicing scientist today.

A seminar in occupational problems of scientists is a crying need in every American university today, though I daresay we would have to dig for the materials or evidence that the need is being recognized.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lawrence Cranberg". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Lawrence Cranberg
Professor of Physics

LC:df
Enclosure